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#4

CEMETERY DANCE PRESENTS

\$3.95

GRAVE TALES

**STORIES OF
UNRELENTING
HORROR BY:**

GLENN CHADBOURNE

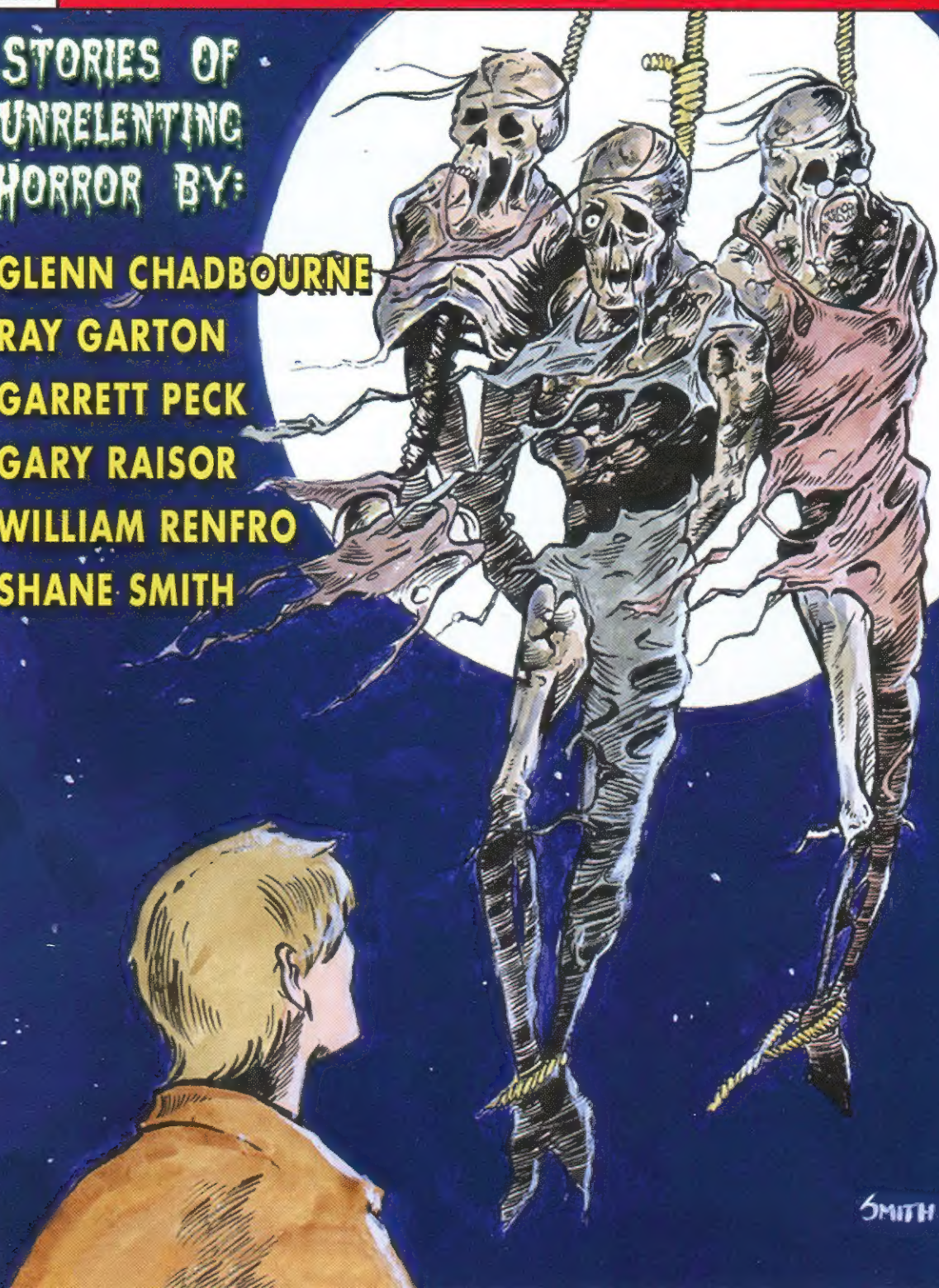
RAY GARTON

GARRETT PECK

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CEMETERY DANCE PRESENTS
GRAVE TALES #4
VOLUME TWO, ISSUE ONE

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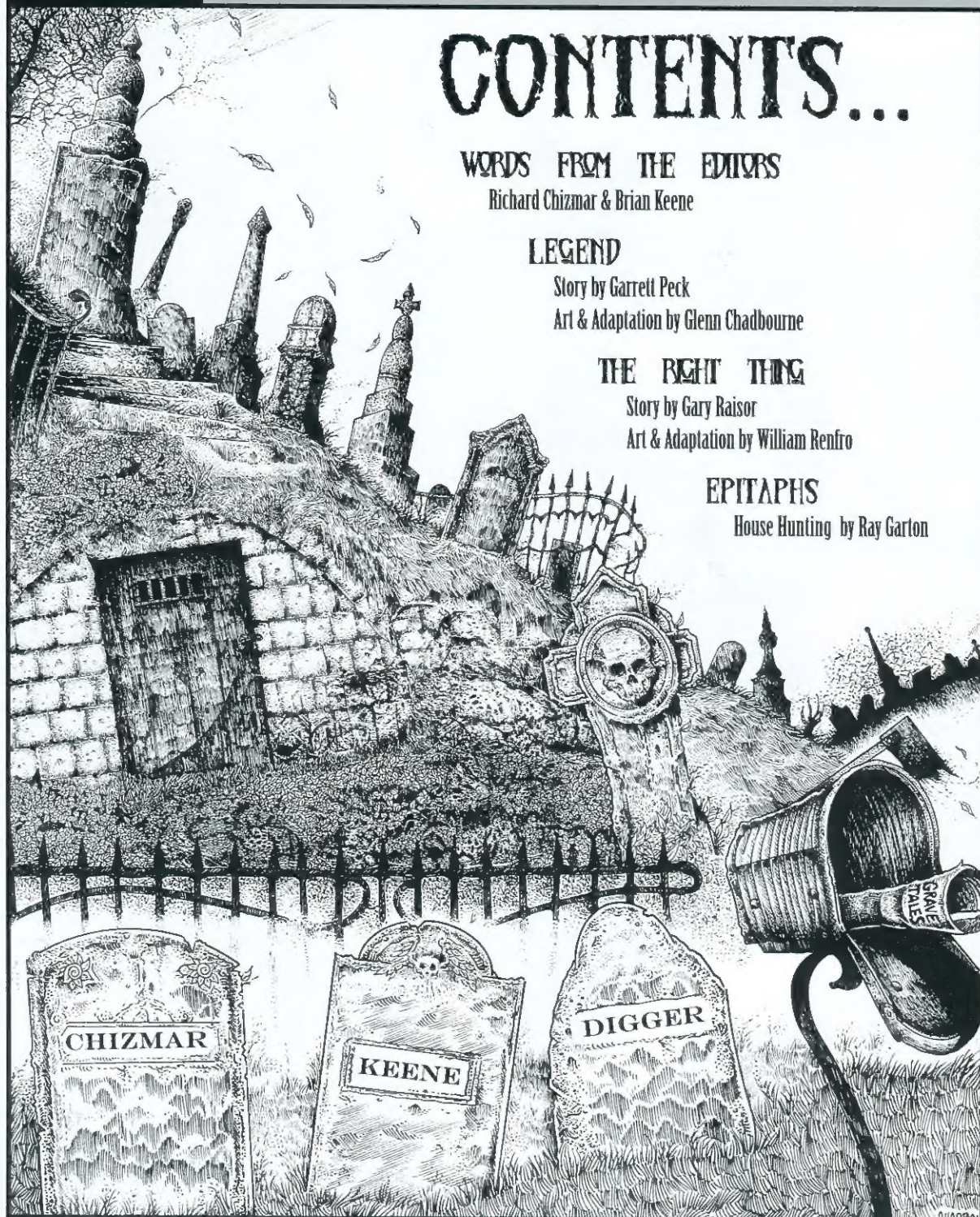
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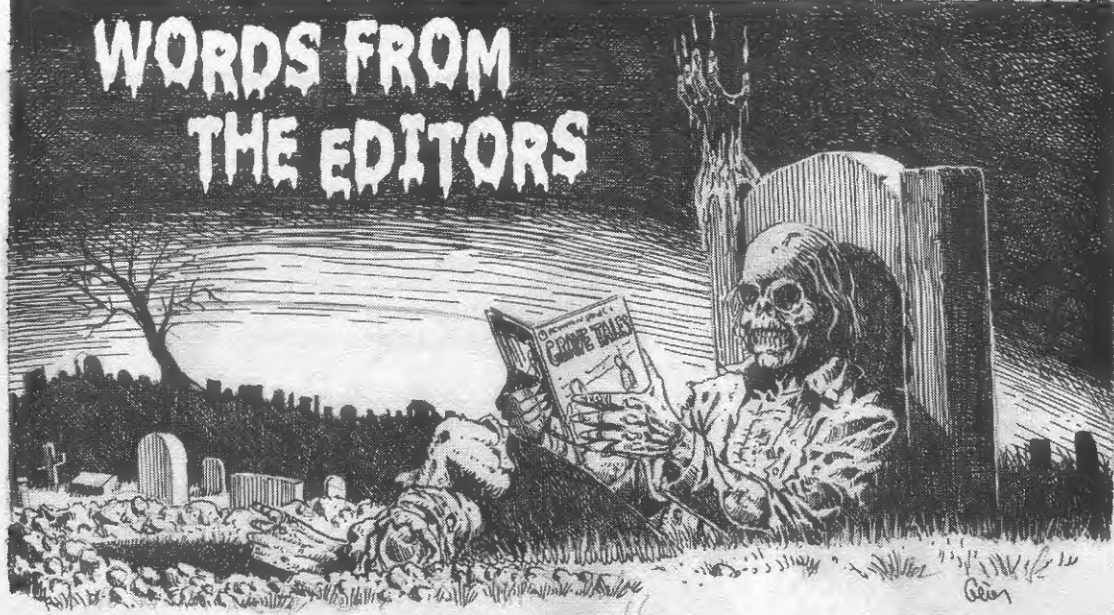
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WORDS FROM THE EDITORS



Welcome to the new *Grave Tales*. Yes, technically it's the fourth issue, but changes are afoot. We think you'll dig them.

A little bit about me. If you look in the dictionary under *Comic Geek*, you'll see my picture. Mid-thirties. Writes horror novels for a living. Comic fan since I was six years old. I grew up on the Marvel, DC, and Charlton titles of the Seventies—stuff like *Man-Thing*, *The Witching Hour*, and *The Occult Files of Doctor Spektor*. I was also a big fan of the Warren magazines like *Creepy* and *Eerie*. Bernie Wrightson and Steve Gerber were gods, Jack Kirby was king, Stan Lee was on his soapbox, and all was right with the world as long as the newsstand had a copy of *Kamandi, Last Boy on Earth*.

Time passed. Reagan replaced Carter, and though I still read comics, I was also beginning to read books—Stephen King, Richard Laymon, Dean Koontz, Graham Masterton—a bazillion others.

Around junior high, the two merged, and I had the best of both worlds.

And that's what we hope to bring you, the *Grave Tales* reader. The best of both worlds: comic adaptations from some of your favorite horror writers, and frightening prose from some of your favorite comic creators.

So stick around. Like I said above, there are some big things in store. Rich and I think you'll dig them.

And Digger does too....

Brian Keene
Associate Editor

Since this is his first issue, I'm going to let the new associate editor, Brian Keene, do all the talking. —ED

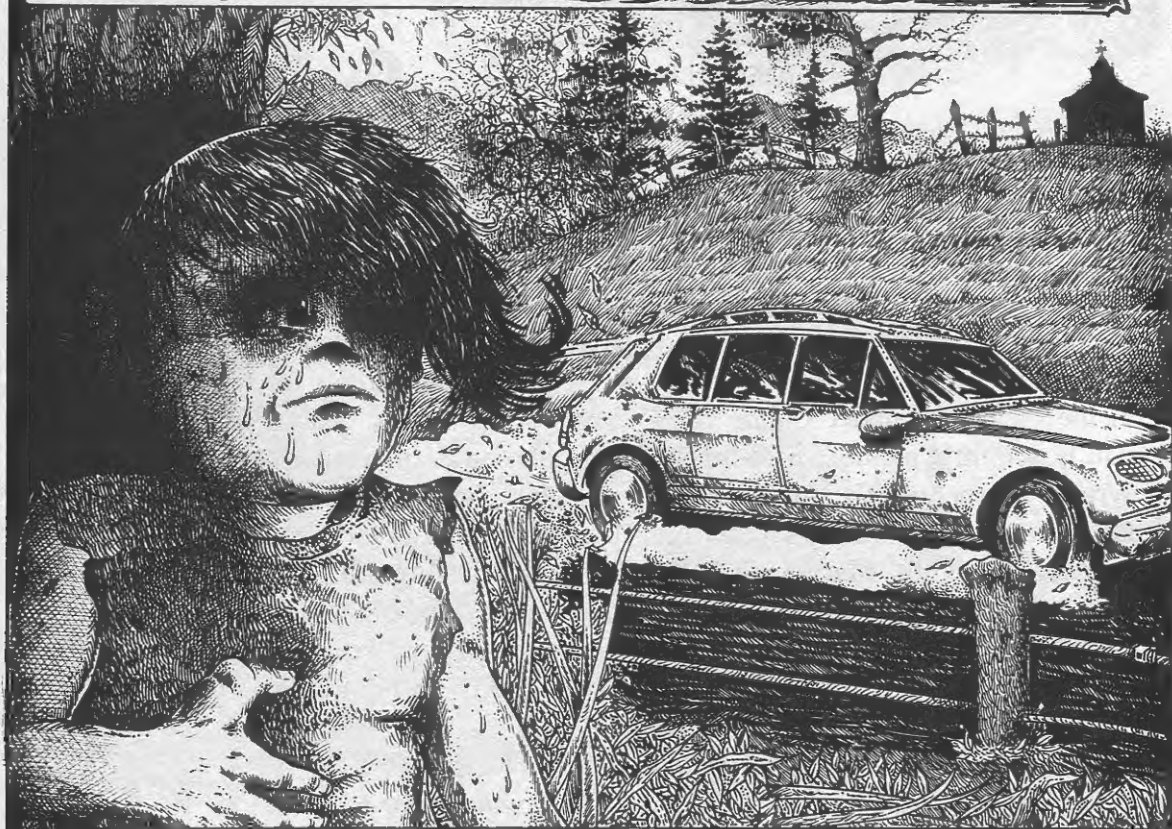
STORY BY GARRETT PECK
ART BY GLENN CHADBOURNE

Legend

At the sound of an approaching vehicle, Billy Conrad leapt into the woods lining the old country road. An approaching vehicle could mean cops. If they found him, he'd be sent back to his stupid grandparents. He would do almost anything to avoid that.

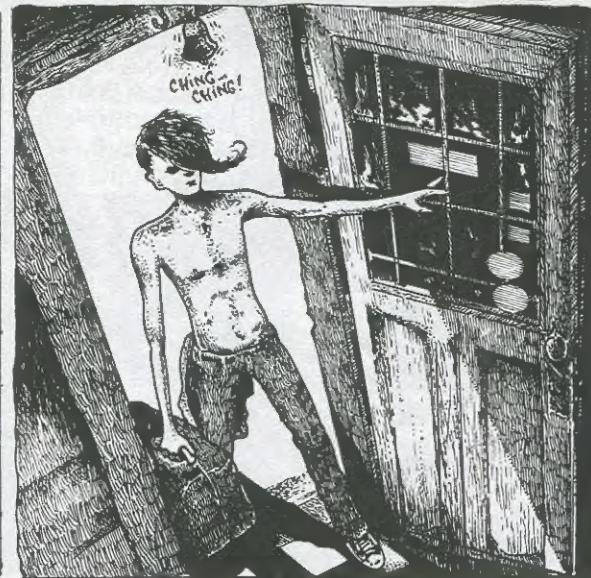
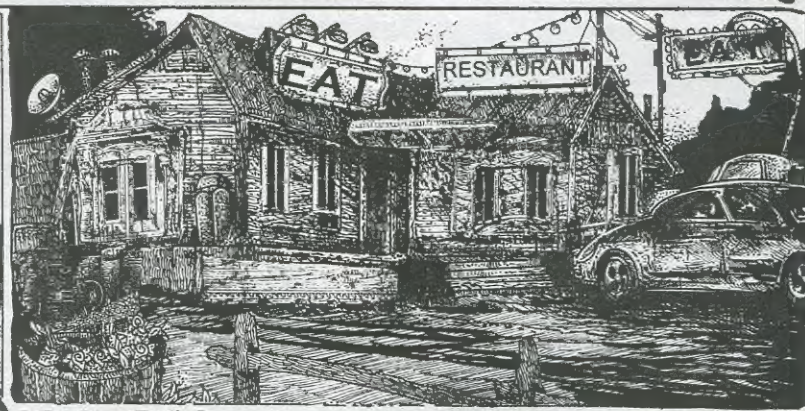
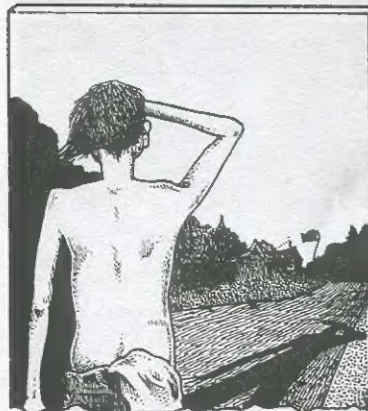
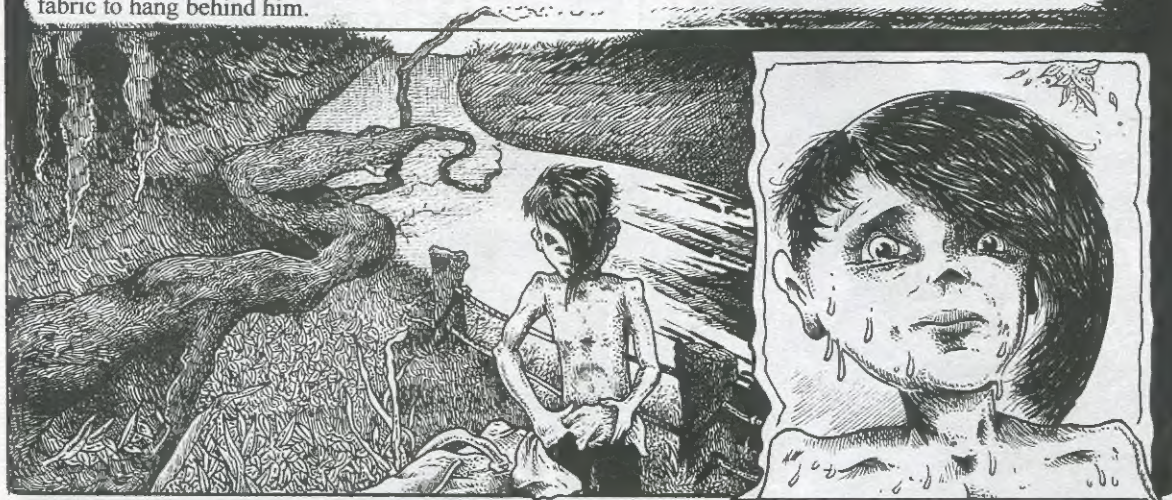
His grandmother would have given them a complete description and photograph of him. She would not take his running away kindly. Nor would she appreciate having her purse raided for traveling cash. She'd be sitting in her kitchen, composing the lecture she would give him on his return.

Billy sighed when the passing car proved to be a station wagon and stepped back on the road. The sun-baked asphalt was a grill beneath his sneakers, but at least the road was straight and flat. No one could sneak up on him.

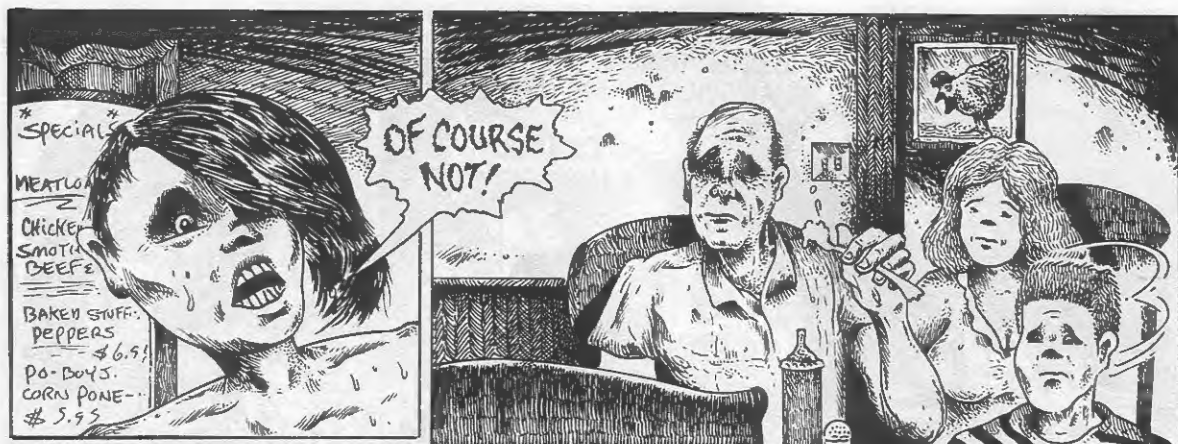


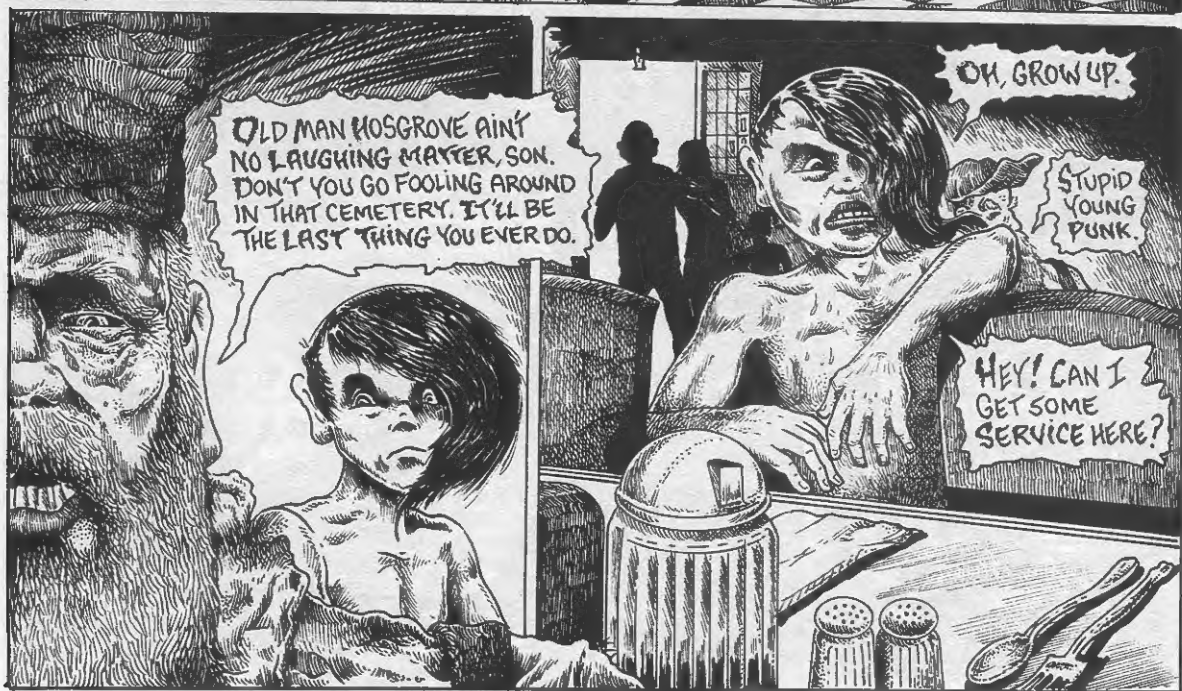
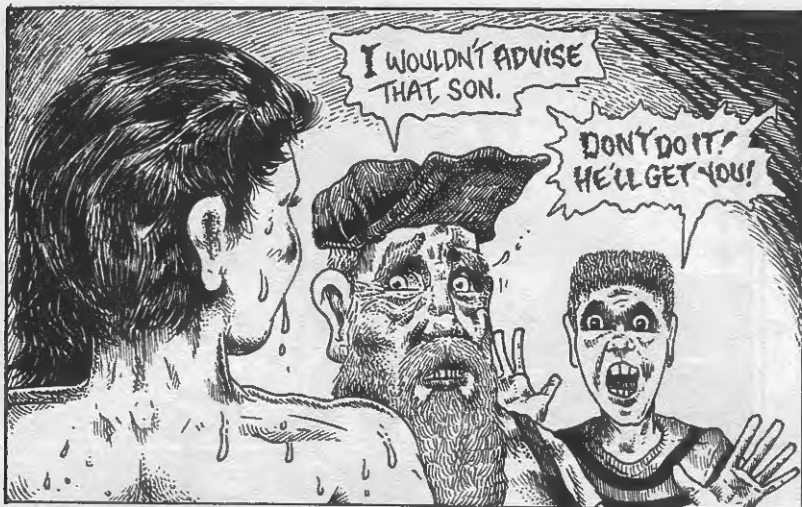
He had been on the run for three days. He couldn't stand living with his grandparents. He'd been there for almost five months since his parents had won the lottery and decided to take an extended vacation in Europe. He had begged his parents to let him go and had just about convinced them. Then his neighbor Mrs. Hatcher had tattled on him for blowing the beak off her prize brood hen with a firecracker. He tried to explain his cruelty by saying he just wanted to see if it would look like it did in Daffy Duck cartoons, but his mom wouldn't listen. She said a mean boy like him didn't deserve a nice vacation. So he was dumped at his **GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE** where he was allowed to have no fun at all. There was nothing but rules, rules, rules. Wipe your feet before coming inside, wash your hands before eating, don't sit so close to the TV, and worse of all, say your prayers. He was twelve years old! He didn't need a bunch of old people telling him what to do! So he took off and had been doing whatever he wanted ever since.

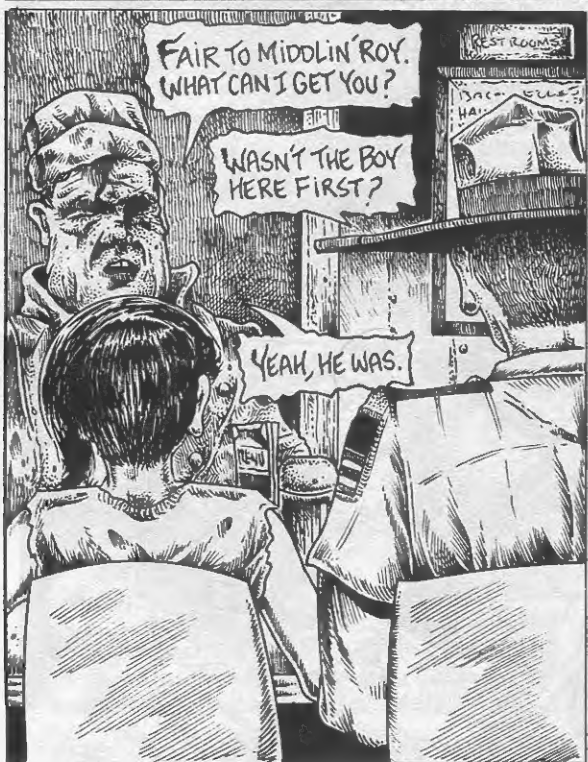
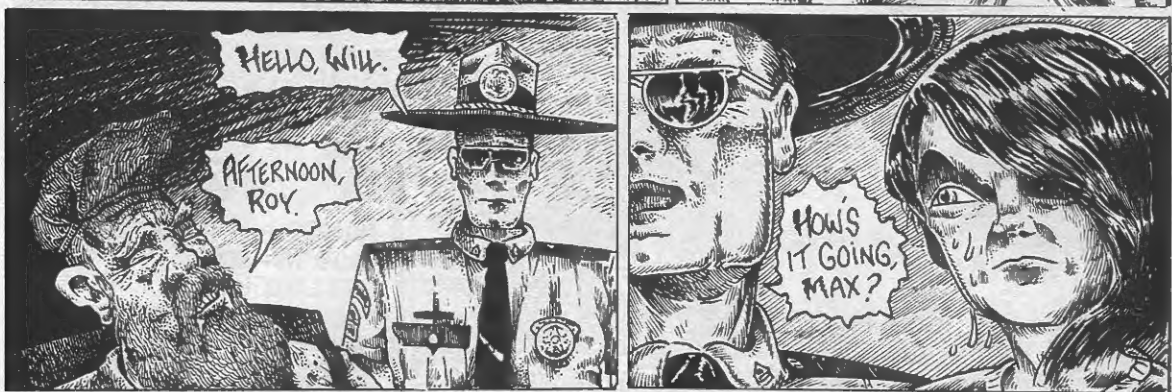
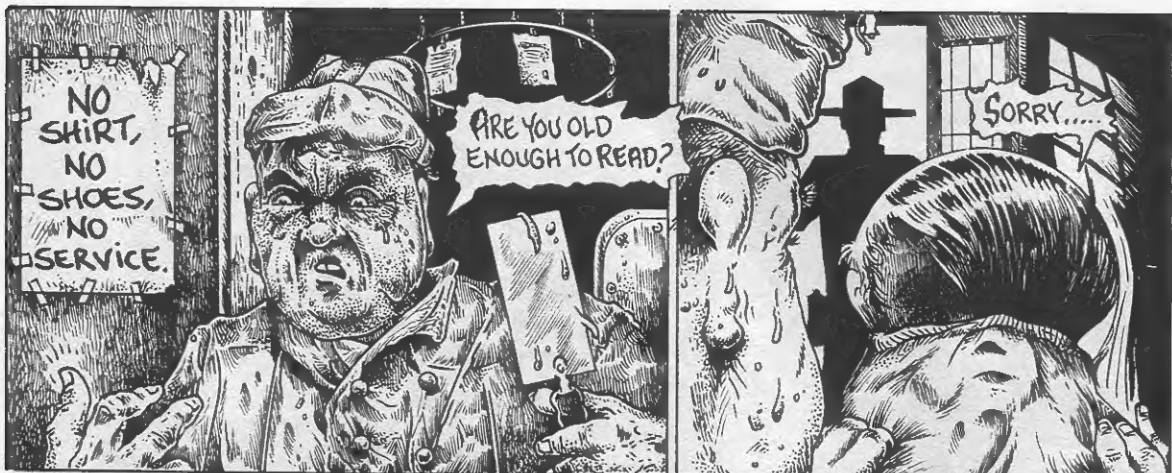
Billy paused in his hike to wipe a sheen of sweat from his brow. **GEEZ** it was hot. The merciless Georgia sun was dehydrating him. He set down his duffel bag, which contained two changes of clothes and a can of spray paint that he used to write "Billy was here" wherever he slept. In deference to the heat, he removed his plain white T-shirt. He stuffed it into the back of his jeans, allowing the excess fabric to hang behind him.

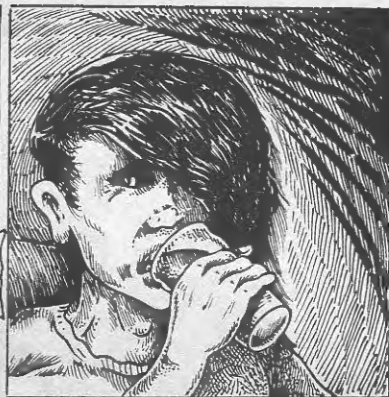










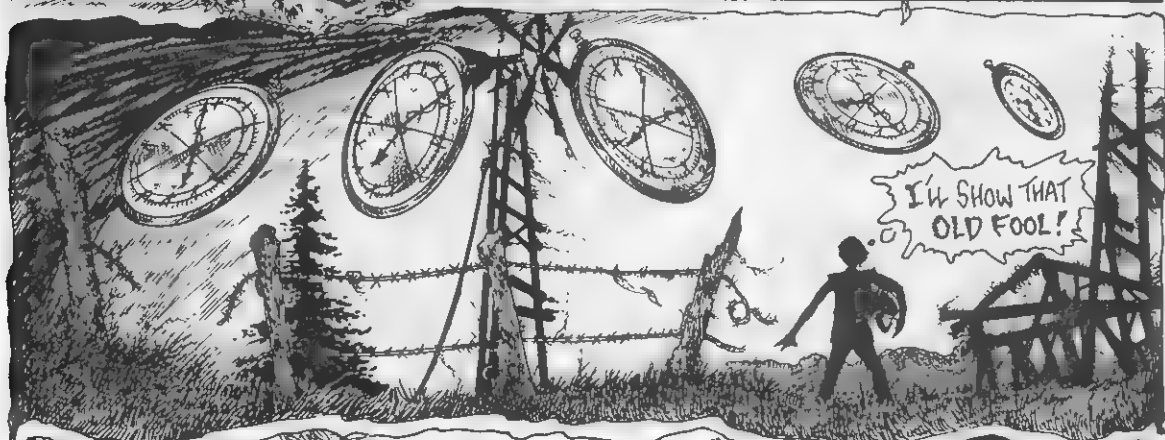




Billy snatched up his bag of belongings and dashed towards the door. The old man moved to block his path, but the agile youth easily dodged past him. He hit the door running. He scanned the parking lot to be sure the trooper was gone, then dashed into the woods. Branches and brambles tore at his clothing. He ran until his over-worked legs could no longer sustain their pace, then slowed to a walk.

That had been too close for comfort. He vowed to stay off the open highway, at least for today, just in case the old storyteller had followed through on his threat to call the police. He would stay close enough to the road not to lose his bearings, but would keep out of plain sight. There was no way he would allow himself to be captured and returned to his stupid grandparents and all their rules.

Ever.



He came upon the cemetery at dusk. He simply stepped past another set of trees and found himself in a large clearing dotted with headstones. It was a lot shabbier than the cemetery he lived by. He wondered if this could be where Old Man Hosgrove was buried. It would certainly be a kick to find the grave. He could sleep on top of it, proving the old storyteller who'd tried to turn him in was a stupid old fool.



IF HE WAS GOING TO DO IT, HE'D HAVE TO MOVE FAST. The sun was already dipping below the horizon. With no flashlight he could never hope to find the tombstone in the dark. Although he'd never admit it to anyone, the idea of being in a dark cemetery frightened him. He would have to fight his fear in order to prove the old man for the idiot he was.

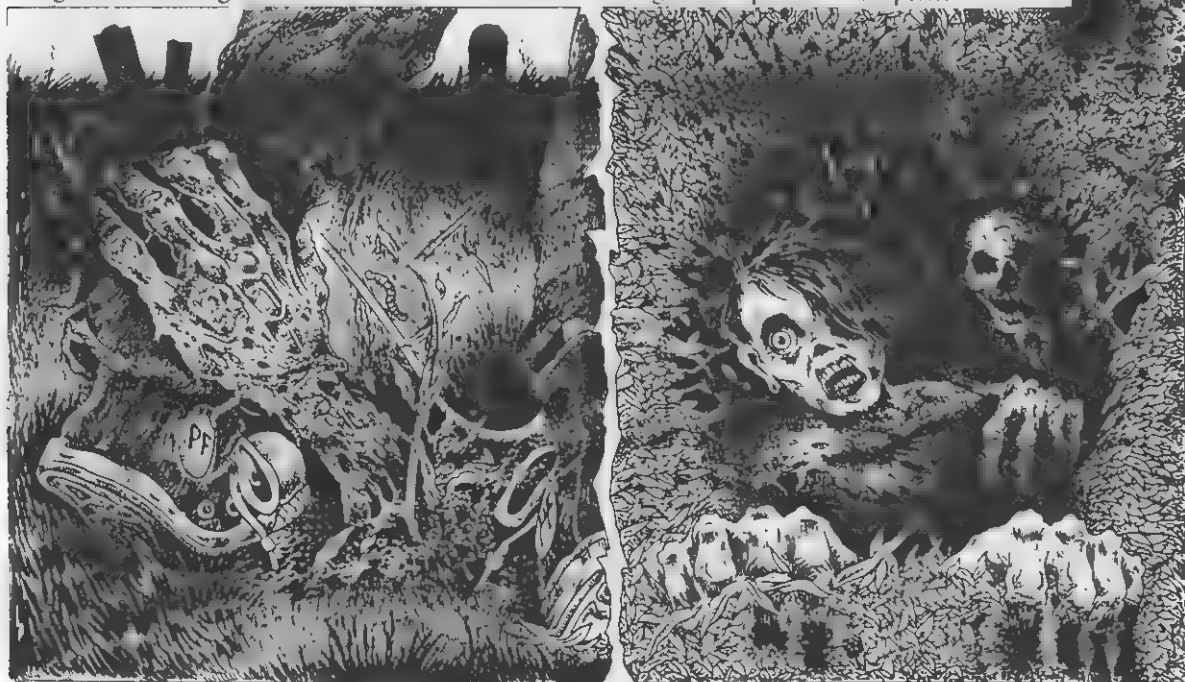
He zigzagged across the field, examining the names of the dead. There were many types of markers. Some were merely brass placards mounted on marble lying close to the ground. Others were so huge and elaborate they were more like monuments than headstones. It didn't seem likely Old Man Hosgrove would have either of these kinds. He'd probably have a traditional upright cement stone. Since there were easily a thousand people buried here and he'd never have the chance to examine them all before he lost his light, he decided to restrict his search to that type.

The light continued to recede. He had to get right up on the markers to read them. He began to despair. His adventure would be over before it really began.



Billy understood how this stone could inspire such a creepy legend. There was something deeply unsettling about it. It was off by itself, as if no one would consent to be buried anywhere near it.

He began to have second thoughts. Suppose Old Man Hosgrove now only a grinning skeleton with loose flaps of pungent, decayed flesh clinging to his bones really was down there waiting? He imagined smothering in insect-infested soil as the madman drug him deeper... and deeper...



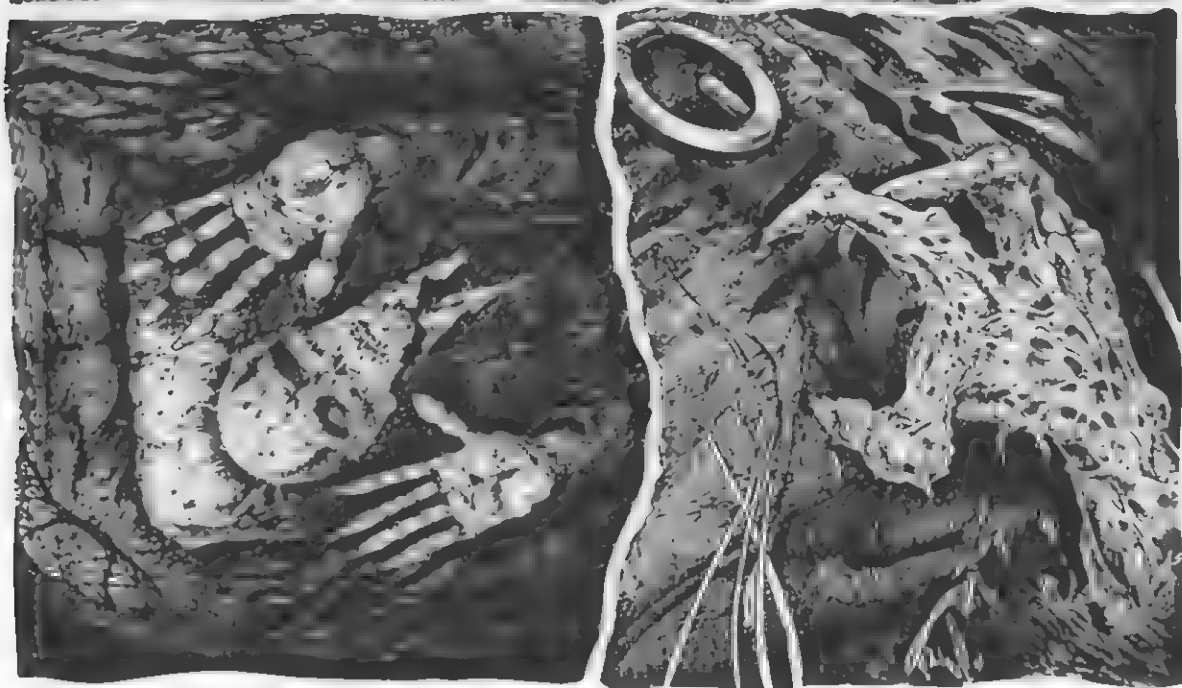
He shook his head to dispel the thought. He was letting that fool of a storyteller get to him. He knew there was no such thing as monsters. At least, he didn't think there were any. Out here in the dark, surrounded by the dead, it was hard to be sure.



Smiling in pride at his desecration, he placed his gym bag, which doubled as a pillow, at the foot of the stone. He slid to the ground, laying his head on it. His wide-open eyes gazed at the sky. The moon, he noticed with aversion, was almost full. The few clouds in the sky glowed faintly with the last gleam of the vanquished sun. Within moments even their sheen had dissipated. The moon provided the only illumination.

Despite himself, Billy couldn't stop feeling jittery. He knew it was **IMPOSSIBLE** for a long-dead corpse to awaken and drag unsuspecting people into the earth, but he couldn't get the idea out of his head. At first he wasn't sure he could get to sleep, but the exhaustion of his hard day's walking finally caught up with him. He drifted off into a land of threatening dreams.





He started awake. His eyes opened, but found only darkness. Disoriented, he struggled to remember where he was.

It came to him in seconds. He was lying on top of Old Man Hosgrove's grave. The recollection brought a flash of terror. He jerked his head up, straining to see through the impenetrable blackness. He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but as dark as it was, he figured it must be past midnight. That was when Old Man Hosgrove was supposed to strike.



He allowed his head to drop back to his makeshift pillow as a wave of calm swept over him. A chuckle rose from his chest. He had made it. He had proved the legend of Old Man Hosgrove was a hoax. Too bad he wouldn't get to tell the old storyteller. He could imagine the look of impotent fury on the man's face as he showed him up for the liar he was. The thought caused him to laugh louder.

When his mirth ran its course he became aware of the cries of whippoorwills emanating from the surrounding forest. During his incarceration he had envied the little brown birds their freedom. Now he was as free as they were. He planned on staying that way, too.



There was an uncomfortable pressure building in his bladder. He had to urinate. He didn't feel like getting up to do it; he wanted only to slip back into unconsciousness. As the pressure increased he realized this would not be possible. He would have to get up and take care of business.

He drew his feet inward and prepared to stand.

And found that he couldn't.

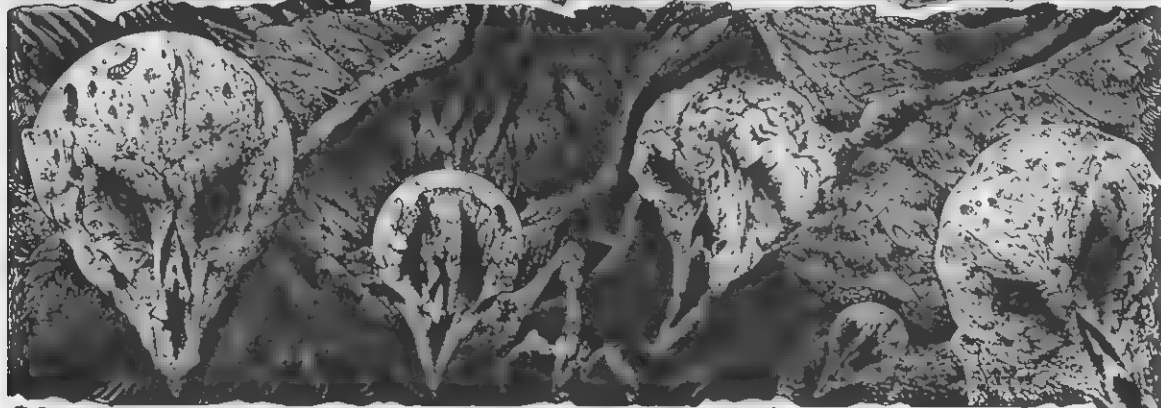
Something had a hold of him.

His heart began pounding to a punk rock beat. This is not happening, his rational mind insisted. He reached behind himself, searching for what was holding him down. His groping fingers discovered...

...another finger.

Gnarled and bony, the dead man's finger held fast to his belt. Waves of shock lanced through his body. He struggled wildly, but the maniacal corpse refused to relinquish its prize.

Billy opened his mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. There were only the cries of the whippoorwills.

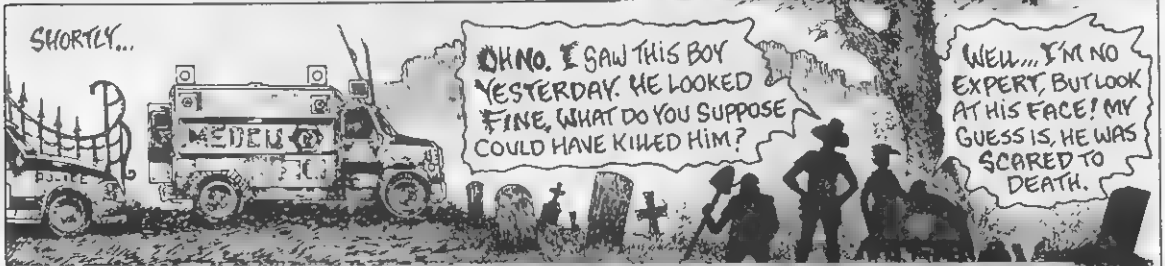


Horace Nemecek, the cemetery's groundskeeper, discovered Billy the next morning. He had seen the bright red letters reading "BILLY SLEPT HERE" all the way from his office. At first he thought the boy was taking a nap. When the boy did not respond to his indignant shouting, he marched over with the intention of shaking him awake. When he got close enough to make out the features of the boy's face he came to an abrupt stop.



One look at Billy's face was enough to convince him this boy would never wake up again. Swarms of flies surrounded the body, alighting on the unblinking eyeballs and crawling into the slack-jawed mouth. Horace was no doctor, but after thirty years of working in a graveyard he was reasonably certain he knew what dead was.

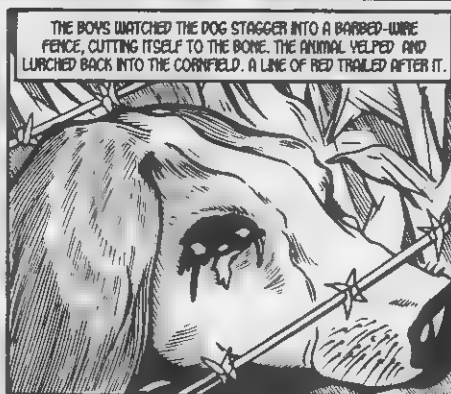
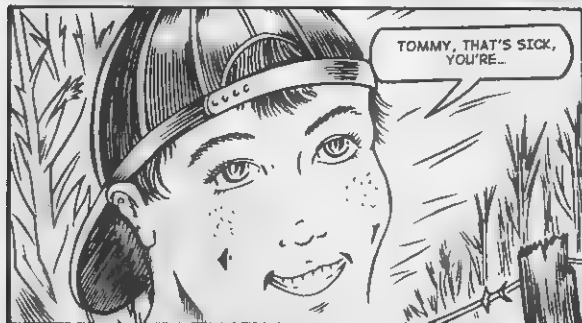
He rushed back to his office to alert the authorities.

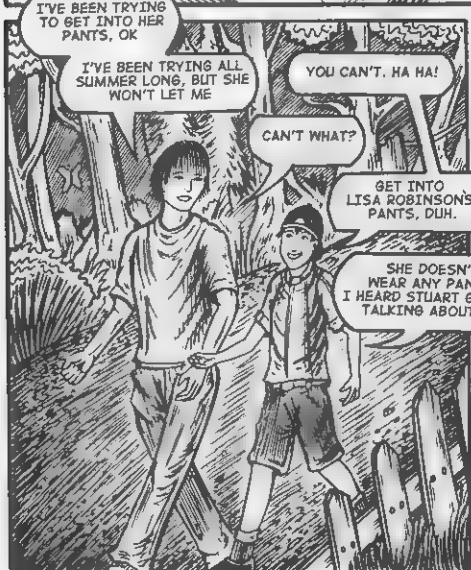


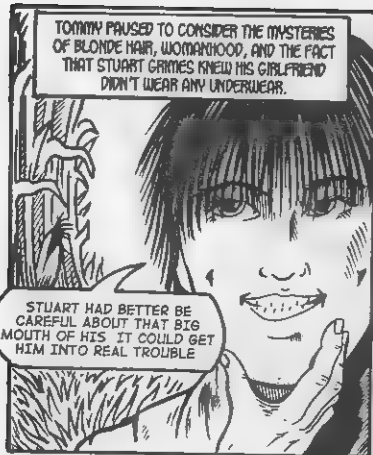
There was nothing more to do but get the body in the ambulance for its journey to the morgue. When the paramedics attempted to lift it, however, it remained stuck fast to the ground. Vigorous tugging failed to loosen it. **ROY** reached down to discover what the problem was.

There was a thick, jagged root growing out of the ground and little Billy Conrad had caught his belt on it.

END







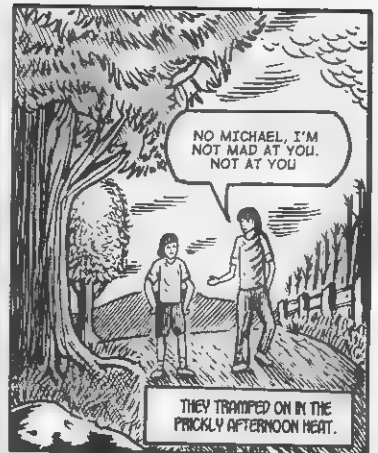
TOMMY PAUSED TO CONSIDER THE MYSTERIES OF BLONDE HAIR, WOMANHOOD, AND THE FACT THAT STUART GRIMES KNEW HIS GIRLFRIEND DIDN'T WEAR ANY UNDERWEAR.

STUART HAD BETTER BE CAREFUL ABOUT THAT BIG MOUTH OF HIS. IT COULD GET HIM INTO REAL TROUBLE.



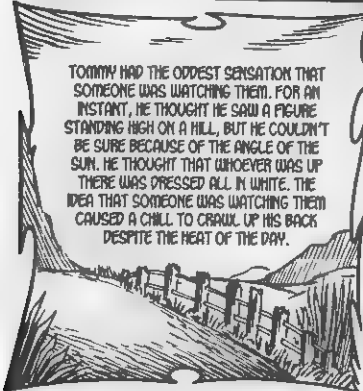
MICHAEL WAS SUDDENLY AFRAID. WHAT HAD STARTED OUT AS FUNNY HAD TAKEN A WRONG TURN AND HAD YEERED INTO UNKNOWN TERRITORY. HIS BROTHER HAD A CRAZY, UNPREDICTABLE TEMPER.

YOU AINT MAD AT ME, ARE YOU TOMMY?



NO MICHAEL, I'M NOT MAD AT YOU. NOT AT YOU.

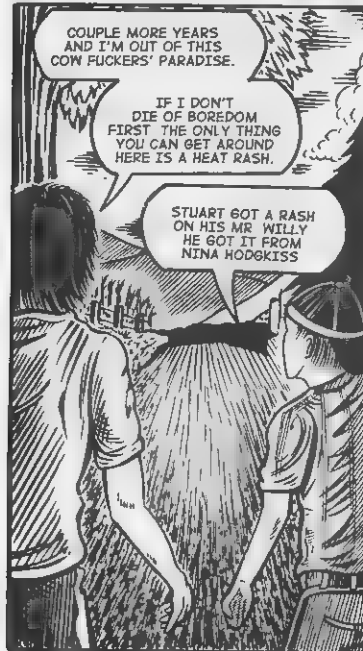
THEY TRAMPED ON IN THE PRICKLY AFTERNOON HEAT.



TOMMY HAD THE ODDEST SENSATION THAT SOMEONE WAS WATCHING THEM. FOR AN INSTANT, HE THOUGHT HE SAW A FIGURE STANDING HIGH ON A HILL, BUT HE COULDN'T BE SURE BECAUSE OF THE ANGLE OF THE SUN. HE THOUGHT THAT WHOEVER WAS UP THERE WAS DRESSED ALL IN WHITE. THE IDEA THAT SOMEONE WAS WATCHING THEM CAUSED A CHILL TO CRAWL UP HIS BACK DESPITE THE HEAT OF THE DAY.



WHEN HE LOOKED BACK AGAIN, THE HILL WAS VACANT.



COUPLE MORE YEARS AND I'M OUT OF THIS COW FUCKERS' PARADISE.

IF I DON'T DIE OF BOREDOM FIRST THE ONLY THING YOU CAN GET AROUND HERE IS A HEAT RASH.

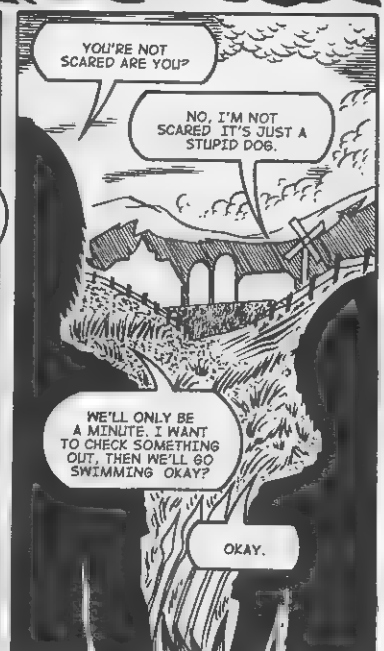
STUART GOT A RASH ON HIS MR WILLY HE GOT IT FROM NINA HODGKISS



ONE MORE WORD ABOUT STUART AND WE'RE GOING HOME.

WAIT A MINUTE. I THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO THE QUARRY.

THIS IS THE WRONG WAY THIS IS THE WAY TO MR. NICHOLS FARM. THIS IS WHERE STEEL...



YOU'RE NOT SCARED ARE YOU?

NO, I'M NOT SCARED IT'S JUST A STUPID DOG.

WE'LL ONLY BE A MINUTE. I WANT TO CHECK SOMETHING OUT, THEN WE'LL GO SWIMMING OKAY?

OKAY.

IN THE FAR DISTANCE, PAST THE HEAT WAVES THAT ROSE WITH WATERY UNDULATIONS, A HERD OF BLACK ANGUS COWS WERE CROWDING UNDER THE ONLY TREE IN THE PASTURE.

TOMMY, I DON'T WANT TO GO ANY CLOSER

THIS IS STEEL'S FARM. HE GUARDS THOSE COWS

YOU SAW WHAT HE DID TO STUART, BIT HIM ON THE FACE

C'MON TOMMY, LET'S NOT DO NOTHING CRAZY.

ARE YOU SAYING I'M CRAZY?

NO...I..

STUART GRIMES IS A BIG FAT PUSSY

STEEL PROBABLY CAUGHT STUART WHILE HE WAS SQUATTING DOWN TO PEE.

NOW LET'S GO.

I HEARD STUART TOOK HIS OLD MAN'S SHOTGUN AND EVENED UP THE SCORE WITH STEEL.

HE SHOT STEEL?

THAT'S THE RUMOR GOING AROUND WE'RE GOING TO SEE IF IT'S TRUE, OR IF STUART'S JUST BLOWING HOT AIR.

THE BLACK SHAPES WERE GROWING CLEARER IN THE HEAT WAVES, AND THE HIGH SWEET ODOR OF ROTTING MEAT REACHED THE BOYS.

THE ODOR GREW STRONGER WITH EACH STEP. THE COWS LAY SPRAWLED AROUND THE TREE, TWISTED INTO UNNATURAL SHAPES. THE DEAD COWS REMINDED MICHAEL OF THE BOXCARS OF A TRAIN DERAILMENT HE'D SEEN IN FORT WAYNE, WHEN HIS DAD HAD TAKEN HIM FOR HIS ASTHMA TESTS.

YOU THINK STUART DID THIS?

SEE THE HOLES IN THEM? THEY WERE KILLED WITH A TWELVE-GAUGE ALL RIGHT.

WHAT IF HE DIDN'T SHOOT STEEL? WHAT IF HE'S STILL RUNNING AROUND LOOSE?

THERE'S STEEL, OVER BY THE BARN.

WHEN! MAN, THEY'RE GETTING PRETTY RIPE

FOLLOWING HIS BROTHERS POINTING FINGER, MICHAEL SAID THE BLACK SHAPE THAT SCARED THE SHIT OUT OF EVERY KID IN TOWN - STEEL. THE DOG WAS MORE DEAD THAN ANYTHING MICHAEL HAD EVER SEEN IN HIS ENTIRE LIFE. BUT THE DOG HADN'T DIED EASILY. HE HAD FOUGHT TO THE BITTER END.

HIS SHINY DARK HIDE WAS PELTED WITH DOZENS OF HOLES WHERE THE SHOTGUN BLASTS HAD STRUCK. THERE WAS A TRAIL OF BLOOD AND SLIME ON THE GROUND WHERE HE HAD CRAWLED TOWARDS HIS ATTACKER, EVEN AS HE WAS DYING. THE LAST BLAST HAD BEEN THE WORST. IT HAD CAUGHT HIM SQUARE IN THE FACE, PUTTING OUT BOTH OF HIS EYES.

HOW COME HE'S ALL SPLIT OPEN?

WE GOT TO TELL SOMEBODY

HOW COME MR. NICHOLS DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT THIS?

LOOKS LIKE A TWELVE-GAUGE TO ME. MAN, STUART WASN'T BLOWING HOT AIR, THAT SHIT FACE REALLY DID IT. HE KILLED STEEL.

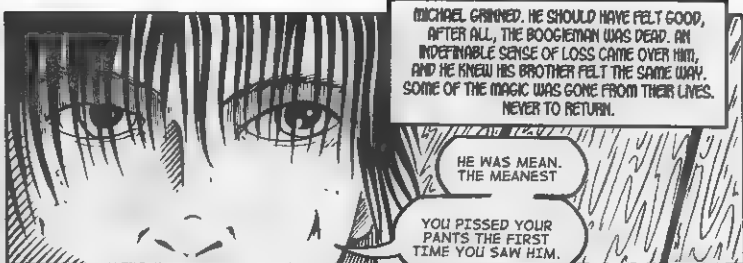
IT'S THE MEAT THAT DOES THAT MAKES THEM SWELL TILL THEY POP





CAUSE HE'S IN
SOUTH BEND AT HIS
DAUGHTER'S HOUSE

THAT BASTARD'S
GONE. I CAN'T FUCKING
BELIEVE IT



MICHAEL GRINNED. HE SHOULD HAVE FELT GOOD,
AFTER ALL, THE BOOGYMAN WAS DEAD. AN
INDEFINABLE SENSE OF LOSS CAME OVER HIM,
AND HE KNEW HIS BROTHER FELT THE SAME WAY.
SOME OF THE MAGIC WAS GONE FROM THEIR LIVES.
NEVER TO RETURN.

HE WAS MEAN.
THE MEANEST

YOU PISSED YOUR
PANTS THE FIRST
TIME YOU SAW HIM.



YEAH, HE
WAS THE MEANEST.

HEY, WHERE
DID YOU COME FROM?



THAT'S WHERE
HE CAME FROM

TOMMY WALKED OVER TO THE CORNER OF THE BARN
AND LOOKED INTO THE SHADOWS. THERE WAS A DEAD
FEMALE ROTTWEILER AND HER FIVE DEAD PUPPIES.
ALL OF THEM HAD BEEN SHOT GUNNED. SOME WERE IN PIECES.



THE LITTLE GUY'S
IN PRETTY BAD SHAPE.



I CAN'T BELIEVE
THAT ASSHOLE STUART
SHOT ALL THE PUPPIES TOO

WHAT ARE WE
GOING TO DO? YOU
THINK DAD'LL LET
US KEEP HIM?



NAH, DAD WON'T
LET US HAVE A DOG,
HE HATES 'EM



WE CAN'T LET HIM
SUFFER, IT WOULDN'T
BE THE RIGHT THING
TO DO

WHAT ARE
WE GOING TO DO?



THE LITTLE BASTARD
LOOKS JUST LIKE HIS
DAD, DOESN'T HE?

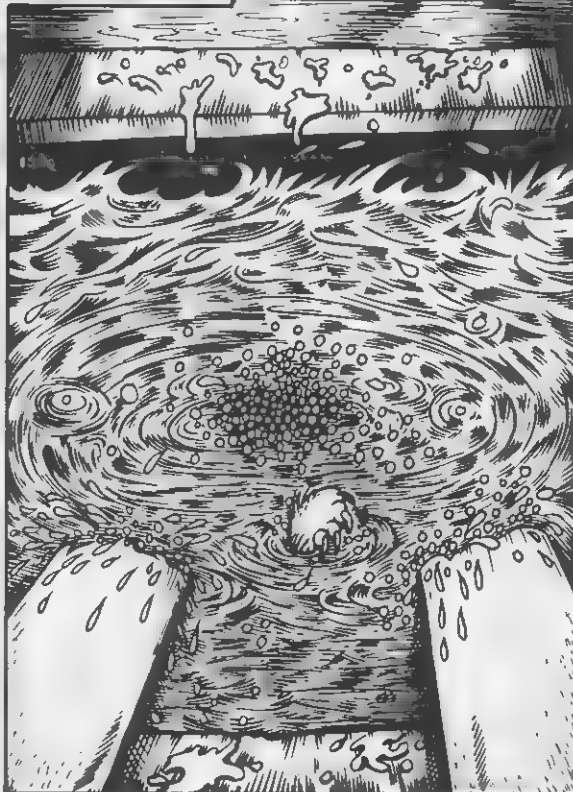
TOMMY STARED INTO THE EYES OF THE PUPPY,
AND IT'S TAIL WAGGED FEEBLY. THEN IT BEGAN
TO WHINE AND LOWERED IT'S HEAD, AS IF IT HAD
GROWN TOO HEAVY TO HOLD UP.

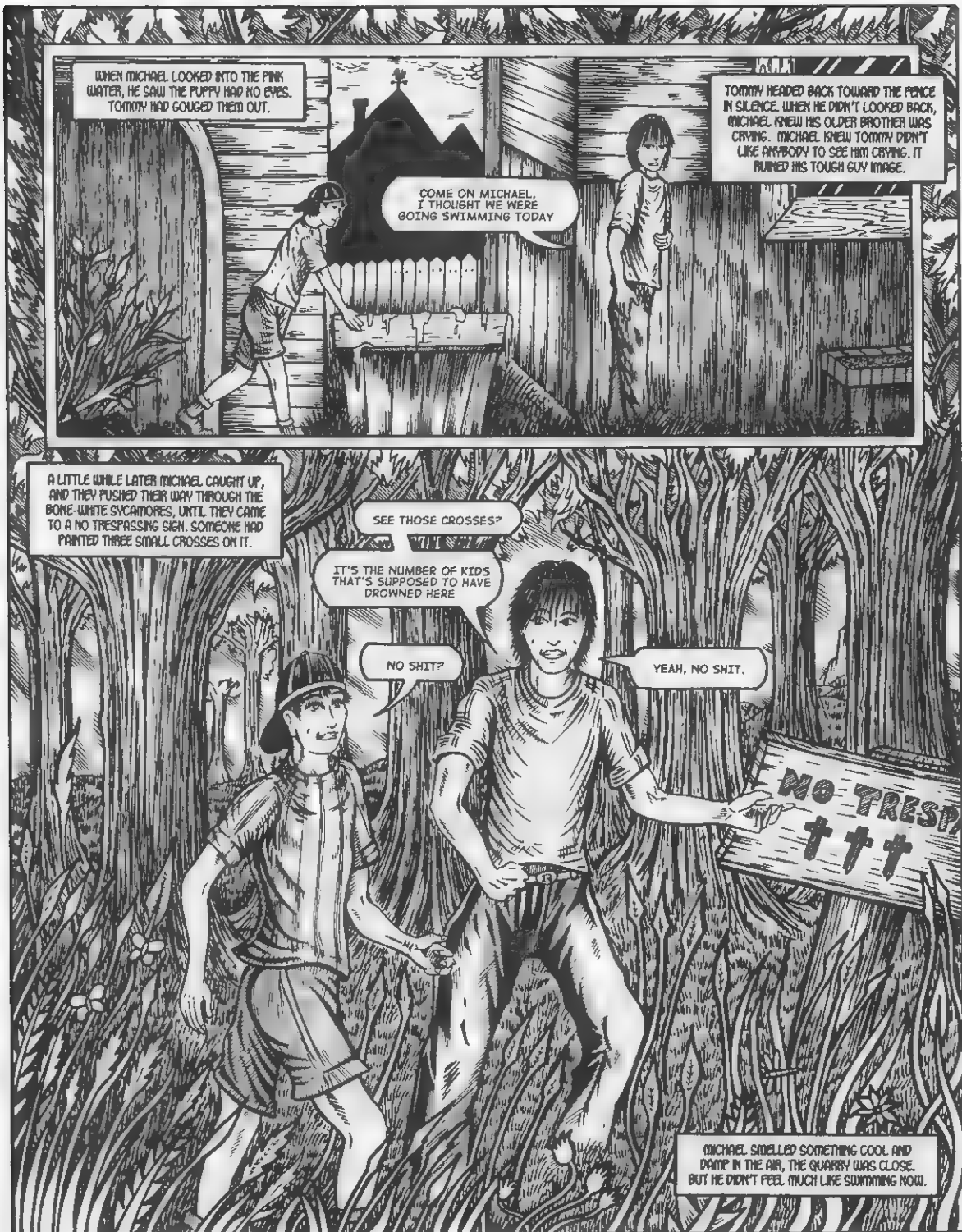
FINALLY, TOMMY TOOK THE PUPPY TO THE WATERING
TROUGH WHERE THE COWS DRANK. HE LOWERED THE
PUPPY IN. THE BABY ROTTWEILER'S MOUTH OPENED
WIDE AS IT TRIED TO BREATHE.

TOMMY, NO
DON'T DO IT!



HE HELD IT UNDER THE WATER
UNTIL IT STOPPED THRASHING.





WHEN MICHAEL LOOKED INTO THE PINK WATER, HE SAW THE PUPPY HAD NO EYES. TOMMY HAD GOUGED THEM OUT.

COME ON MICHAEL, I THOUGHT WE WERE GOING SWIMMING TODAY

TOMMY HEADED BACK TOWARD THE FENCE IN SILENCE. WHEN HE DIDN'T LOOKED BACK, MICHAEL KNEW HIS OLDER BROTHER WAS CRYING. MICHAEL KNEW TOMMY DIDN'T LIKE ANYBODY TO SEE HIM CRYING. IT RUINED HIS TOUGH GUY IMAGE.

A LITTLE WHILE LATER MICHAEL CAUGHT UP, AND THEY PUSHED THEIR WAY THROUGH THE BONE-WHITE SYCAMORES, UNTIL THEY CAME TO A NO TRESPASSING SIGN. SOMEONE HAD PRINTED THREE SMALL CROSSES ON IT.

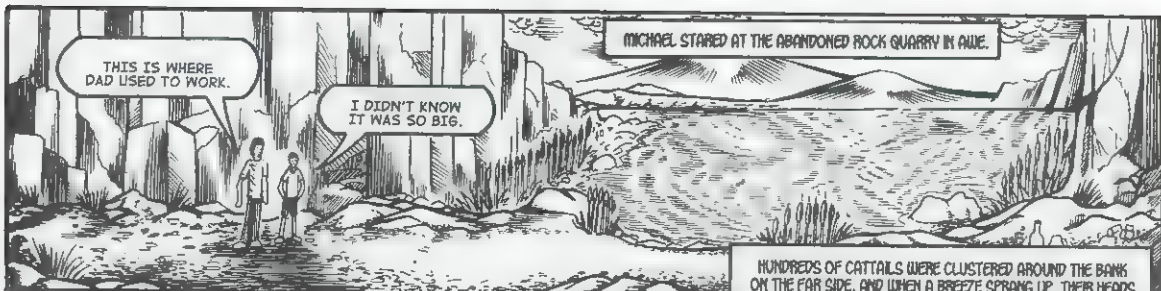
SEE THOSE CROSSES?

IT'S THE NUMBER OF KIDS THAT'S SUPPOSED TO HAVE DROWNED HERE

NO SHIT?

YEAH, NO SHIT.

MICHAEL SMELLED SOMETHING COOL AND DAMP IN THE AIR, THE QUARRY WAS CLOSE. BUT HE DIDN'T FEEL MUCH LIKE SWIMMING NOW.



THIS IS WHERE
DAD USED TO WORK.

I DIDN'T KNOW
IT WAS SO BIG.

MICHAEL STARED AT THE ABANDONED ROCK QUARRY IN AWE.

HUNDREDS OF CATTAILS WERE CLUSTERED AROUND THE BANKS ON THE FAR SIDE, AND WHEN A BREEZE SPRANG UP, THEIR HEADS BENT TOGETHER, AND THEIR SOFT CLICKING VOICES WHISPERED SECRETS TOMMY COULDN'T QUITE DECIPHER. HE KNEW THEY WERE WHISPERING ABOUT HIM, THOUGH.

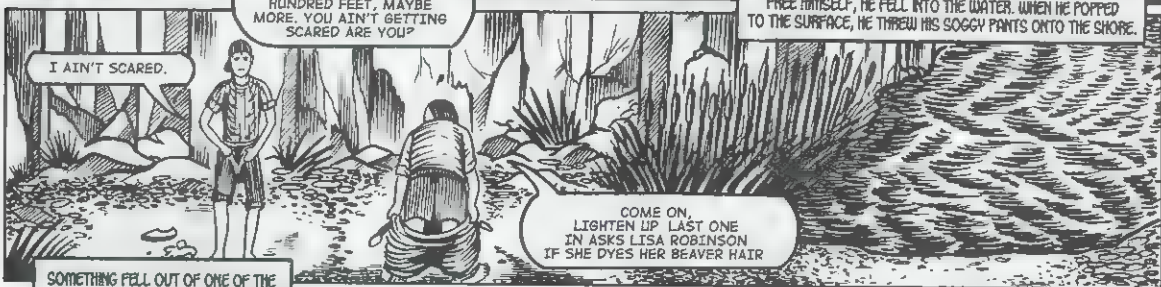


HOW COME THE
WATER TURNS BLACK?

BECAUSE IT'S SO DEEP.

DON'T KNOW.
COULD BE A COUPLE
HUNDRED FEET, MAYBE
MORE. YOU AIN'T GETTING
SCARED ARE YOU?

TOMMY BEGAN STRIPPING OFF HIS JEANS, BUT BEFORE HE COULD FREE HIMSELF, HE FELL INTO THE WATER. WHEN HE POPPED TO THE SURFACE, HE THREW HIS SOGGY PANTS ONTO THE SHORE.



I AIN'T SCARED.

COME ON,
LIGHTEN UP. LAST ONE
IN ASKS LISA ROBINSON
IF SHE DYES HER BEAVER HAIR

SOMETHING FELL OUT OF ONE OF THE
POCKETS. IT WAS A SHOTGUN SHELL.



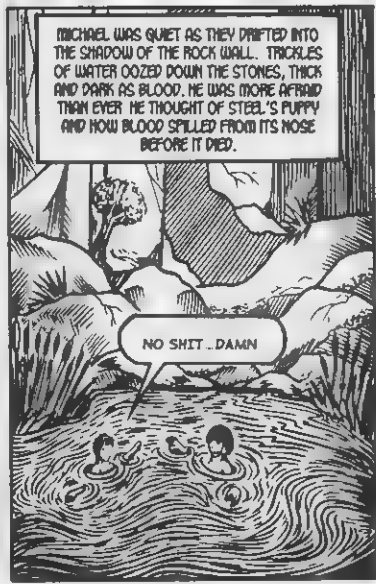
I PICKED THAT
UP AT THE FARM.

YOU'D BETTER HURRY
UP IF YOU'RE GOING TO
GET YOUR SCRAWNY BUTT WET

MICHAEL SAW THAT THE SHELL WAS UNFIRED AND SOMETHING FRIGHTENING OCCURRED TO HIM. WHAT IF TOMMY KILLED THOSE ANIMALS AT OLD MAN NICHOLS' PLACE? MICHAEL DIDN'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT THAT. BECAUSE THAT WOULD MEAN HIS BROTHER REALLY WAS CRAZY LIKE ALL THOSE OTHER KIDS SAID.



WE'VE ALREADY
WASTED TOO MUCH
TIME ON THOSE DOGS





HOW COME YOU
BOULED THE PUPPIES
EYES OUT?

I DON'T KNOW
MAYBE I DIDN'T WANT
HIM LOOKING AT ME

DID YOU DO IT
TO THE BEAGLE TOO?

JESUS, WILL YOU
KNOCK IT OFF WITH ALL
THE DAMNED QUESTIONS
WHO CARES ABOUT SOME
STUPID OLD DOG?

BEAGLES ARE SLOW
AND DUMB, KINDA LIKE
YOU MAYBE HE WAS SAD
BECAUSE HE COULDN'T CATCH
ANY RABBITS MAYBE HE TRIED
TO KILL HIMSELF AND FUCKED
UP THE JOB, OK?



OKAY CAN I
ASK YOU ONE MORE
QUESTION?

IS IT ABOUT THE
COWS AND THOSE DOGS?

SORT OF YOU
PROMISE YOU WON'T
GET MAD AT ME?

I WON'T GET MAD.

ARE YOU REALLY,
YOU KNOW LIKE WHAT
THE KIDS AT SCHOOL
SAY ABOUT YOU?

TOMMY LOOKED INTO MICHAEL'S EYES, AND FOR A SECOND, EVERYTHING DISSOLVED,
IT WAS LIKE LOOKING INTO A WINDOW OF SOME OTHER PLACE, THAT THERE WERE PEOPLE
IN THAT OTHER PLACE, DRESSED ALL IN WHITE, AND THEY WERE LOOKING BACK AT HIM



CRAZY? THAT'S WHAT
THEY SAY, ISN'T IT,
THAT I'M CRAZY?



THE TEENAGER SQUEEZED HIS EYES SHUT,
THEN OPENED THEM, AND EVERYTHING WAS
OK. THE PEOPLE IN WHITE WERE GONE.



THIS TRIP'S TURNING
INTO A REAL FUCKING DRAG

MICHAEL'S GAZE TRAVELED UP THE ROCK WALL,
AND HE REALIZED WHAT HIS BROTHER WAS ABOUT TO DO.

HEY, MICHAEL, YOU WANT TO
SEE ME DO SOMETHING NEAT?



NO, TOMMY, DON'T
BE STUPID, IT'S TOO HIGH

DON'T DO
NOTHING CRAZY

TOO LATE, HE REALIZED HE HAD SAID THE WORST
THING HE COULD HAVE SAID, THE VERY WORST.



YOU THINK I'M
CRAZY, WELL I'LL
SHOW YOU CRAZY!



PLEASE, TOMMY,
WE'D BETTER GET HOME.
DAD'S GOING TO BE
LOOKING FOR US

DAD CAN KISS
MY ASS I AIN'T
AFRAID OF HIM



WAIT, TOMMY,
I CAN'T BREATHE,
I CAN'T...



MICHAEL WATCHED IN HORROR AS HIS
BROTHER LEAPED INTO SPACE. TOMMY
WAS A GOOD DIVER, BUT SOMETHING WAS
WRONG. HE MUST HAVE SLIPPED, HE WAS
FLAILING HIS ARMS IN CIRCLES, TRYING TO
REGAIN HIS BALANCE. HE WASN'T GOING
TO GET STRAIGHTENED OUT IN TIME.



TOMMY'S MOUTH OPENED IN A WIDE OVAL.
A SCREAM HE WAS TOO TERRIFIED TO
UTTER. HE SMACKED INTO THE WATER AND
IT ERUPTED IN A VIOLENT GEYSER, STINGING
MICHAEL AS HE STOOD AT THE WATER'S EDGE.



TOMMY!

AND JUST LIKE THAT, TOMMY WAS GONE.



TOMMY,
YOU SHITHEAD, QUIT IT
I AIN'T LAUGHING

MICHAEL WAITED ANXIOUSLY FOR HIS BROTHER TO POP TO THE SURFACE, BUT THE SURFACE BECAME AS CLEAR AS GLASS.

THE SECONDS TICKED BY WITH AGONIZING SLOWNESS AND THE STILL WATER REMAINED UNDISTURBED. TIME HAD CEASED TO EXIST. A FAINT BREEZE RUFFLED MICHAEL'S HAIR. HE WISHED HE HAD HIS ASPIRATOR AS HE WAITED FOR TOMMY TO RESURFACE.

THERE WAS ONLY SILENCE. THE CATTAILS WEREN'T EVEN WHISPERING NOW. THIS WASN'T A JOKE, TOMMY WAS DOWN THERE, WAY DOWN WHERE IT WAS DARK AND COLD. WHERE HE COULDN'T BREATHE. MICHAEL KNEW WHAT THAT WAS LIKE, ALL TOO WELL.

HE HAD TO FIND TOMMY. MICHAEL SLID INTO THE WATERY BLACKNESS. HE GROPED DOWNWARD, FIGHTING BACK HIS FEAR. DEEPER AND DEEPER. KICKING. GROPING. NO TOMMY. ONLY DARKNESS. JUST AS HE WAS ABOUT TO EXPLODE, HE BUMPED INTO SOMETHING. WHATEVER IT WAS, WRAPPED AROUND HIS ANKLE AND HELD HIM FAST.

HE KICKED, TRYING TO BREAK FREE, FIGHTING AWAY PANIC. BUT THE PANIC WON OUT, AND HIS AIR WAS GONE. HE BEGAN THRASHING WILDLY. HIS HEART POUNDING IN HIS EARS. CLAWING, RAKING WATER, GROPING TOWARD THE SURFACE, BUT IT REMAINED OUT OF REACH. HE OPENED HIS MOUTH AND SCREAMED.

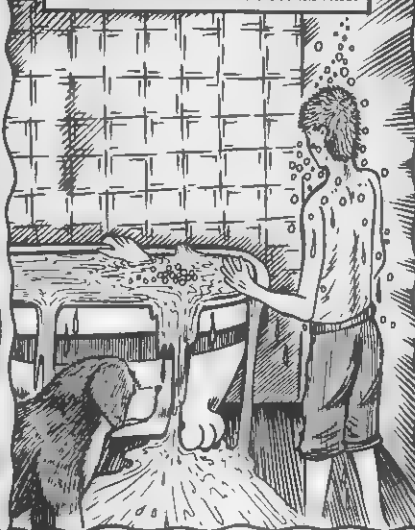
THE WATER FILLED HIS LUNGS LIKE A SLEDGEHAMMER MADE OF ICE. BUT WITH EACH BREATH, THE COLD WENT AWAY, ALONG WITH HIS FEAR, AND HIS PAIN. HE TOOK ONE LAST BREATH, THE WATER WAS HIS FRIEND, AND ALL THE COLD WAS GONE.

ALL GONE...

AS DARKNESS CAME FOR HIM, MICHAEL SAW STEEL. THE HUGE DOG WAS TRYING TO SHOW HIM SOMETHING BEHIND A DOOR.



THE DOOR FLEW OPEN AND MICHAEL SAW A BATHTUB OVERFLOWING WITH WATER. THERE WAS SOMEONE JUST BENEATH THE SURFACE BUT HE COULDN'T MAKE OUT THE FACE.



THE DOOR CLOSED, AND STEEL WAS DEAD. AND MICHAEL BREATHED ONE LAST TIME.



A FEW BUBBLES FLOATED TO THE SURFACE OF THE QUARRY. EVERYTHING BECAME SERENE. AND THE CATTAILS BEGAN TO WHISPER AGAIN.



A RIPPLE STIRRED BELOW. SOMETHING WAS COMING. SUDDENLY, TOMMY BURST THROUGH THE SURFACE, GASPING FOR AIR.





THE SOUND OF WATER LAPPING AGAINST THE SHORE CAME TO HIM, LANGUID, PEACEFUL, HE THOUGHT HE MIGHT REST FOR A MOMENT. HE WAS MORE TIRED THAN HE EVER REMEMBERED BEING BEFORE. HE THOUGHT OF HIS BROTHER. HE WONDERED IF MICHAEL WERE COLD. HE HOPED NOT.

HIS EYES GREW HEAVY AS HE WATCHED A BIRD SPIN AWAY FROM THE QUARRY WALL. THE BIRD WAS FREE, WITHOUT GUILT, HE ENVIED IT.

HIS EYES CLOSED AND HE SLEPT.

AND WHILE HE SLEPT...

HE DREAMED...

...DREAMED ABOUT A MAN AND A SIX YEAR OLD BOY BY HIS SIDE.

SON, LITTLE THINGS CAN'T FEND FOR THEMSELVES. THEY'VE GOT TO HAVE BIG THINGS TAKE CARE OF THEM, OR THEY DIE.

THOSE PUPPIES IN THE SACK GOT NO MOTHER TO TAKE CARE OF THEM. THEY'RE SICK AND THEY'RE GONNA DIE SLOWLY. THEY'LL SUFFER. YOU DON'T WANT THAT, DO YOU?

NO.

SOMETIMES, A MAN HAS TO DO THINGS THAT ARE HARD. THAT'S WHAT BEING A MAN IS ALL ABOUT.

I WANT YOU TO PROVE TO ME THAT YOU'RE READY TO BE A MAN. YOU KNOW WHAT YOU GOT TO DO, DON'T YOU?

YES.


THE LONGER YOU WAIT, THE HARDER IT'S GOING TO BE.

WE COULD GET THEM SOME MEDICINE, THEN THEY WOULDN'T BE SICK ANYMORE.

WE AIN'T GOT MONEY TO BUY MEDICINE FOR A BUNCH OF STRAY PUPS.

THEY LAID ME OFF AT THE QUARRY, THEY SAID THEY'LL CALL ME BACK AS THINGS PICK UP. THAT'S A GODDAMNED LIE, THE QUARRY'S FINISHED AND EVERYBODY KNOWS IT.


THE BOY COULD SENSE HIS FATHER'S ANGER. THE HAND ON THE BOY'S SHOULDER TIGHTENED. HE WAS AFRAID. HE KNEW WHAT HE HAD TO DO. MAYBE, IF JUST THIS ONCE, HE COULD MAKE HIS FATHER PROUD, EVERYTHING WOULD BE OKAY. IT WOULD BE BACK LIKE IT WAS BEFORE MOM DIED.




AS HE EDGED NEARER TO THE CREEK, THE BOY THOUGHT ABOUT HOW THE PUPPIES WOULD LOOK - DEAD.



HE LOOKED AT HIS FATHER AND HESITATED. HIS EYES HELD A FINAL DESPERATE APPEAL.



THE BOY TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND PUSHED THE BAG INTO THE WATER. THE SMALL WHIPS OF THE PUPPIES FILLED THE BOY'S EARS.



HIS FATHER LOOKED AWAY.



THE BAG HELD FOR A BIT, THEN SLID UNDER. THE WATCHING WAS SILENCED.



IN A MOMENT, THE PUPPIES WERE GONE.



BUT SOMEHOW ONE HAD GOTTEN FREE. IT SWAM GAMBLY TOWARD THE SHORE.



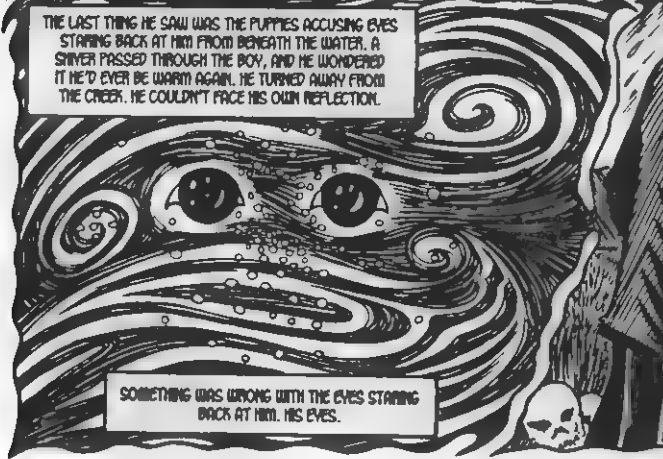
A SECOND BEFORE THE PUPPY WOULD REACH SAFETY, THE RAIN RIELT AND PUSHED IT UNDER.




THE BOY WATCHED AS IT'S SMALL, PINK TONGUE UNFURLED AS IT STRUGGLED TO BREATHE.



HE WATCHED AS IT DIED.



THE LAST THING HE SAW WAS THE PUPPIES ACCUSING EYES STARING BACK AT HIM FROM BENEATH THE WATER. A SHIVER PASSED THROUGH THE BOY, AND HE WONDERED IF HE'D EVER BE WARM AGAIN. HE TURNED AWAY FROM THE CREEK. HE COULDN'T FACE HIS OWN REFLECTION.



I'M PROUD OF YOU WHAT YOU DID MIGHT SEEM HARSH TO YOU NOW, BUT SOMEDAY YOU'LL LOOK BACK ON THIS AND SEE YOU DID THE RIGHT THING



SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH THE EYES STARING BACK AT HIM. HIS EYES.

THE BOY LOOKED INTO HIS FATHER'S EYES. HE SAW THEY WERE THE SAME GREEN AS THE CREEK, AND IN THEIR DEPTHS HE SAW DEAD PUPPIES FLOATING, STARING ACCUSINGLY AT HIM WITH THEIR PINK TONGUES LOLLING FROM THEIR MOUTHS.

YES SIR,
I DID THE
RIGHT THING.

TOMMY.

TOMMY, WAKE UP.

HUH?

MICHAEL?
WHAT ARE YOU
DOING HERE? I THOUGHT
I KILLED YOU?

YOU DID THIS MAKES
NINE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-THREE
TIMES YOU'VE KILLED ME

THEN WHY
DO YOU KEEP
COMING BACK?

BECAUSE YOU KEEP
BRINGING ME BACK,
YOU STUPID SHIT.

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO
KEEPS DOING THIS OVER
AND OVER BUT IT'S NOT
GOING TO CHANGE. YOU CAN'T
BRING ME BACK. YOU NEED
TO LET ME GO.

TOMMY COULD SEE THAT THE SUN WAS
GOING DOWN, AND REALIZED HE MUST
HAVE SLEPT FOR A VERY LONG TIME.

I WAS DREAMING,
MICHAEL, OF ENDLESS
ROWS OF WHITE ROOMS
AND PEOPLE WITH DEAD-WHITE
SKIN WHO KEEP WATCHING ME
I HEAR THEM WHISPERING MY
NAME. WHAT DO THEY WANT?

THEY WANT YOU TO
LET GO OF ME. LET GO
OF YOUR PAST. DON'T
YOU GET IT?

THOSE PEOPLE IN
YOUR DREAMS ARE DOCTORS
YOU WENT CRAZY TOMMY, CRAZY
AS A SHITHOUSE RAT. NOW YOU
LIVE IN A LITTLE WHITE ROOM
WHERE THEY HAVE TO WATCH
YOU ALL THE TIME

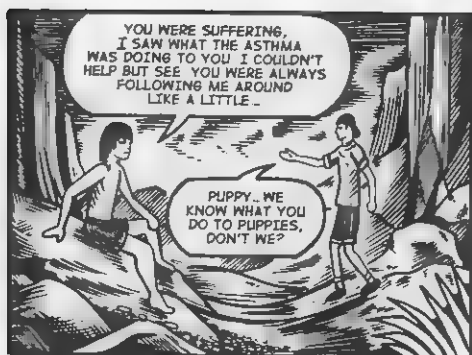
I ONLY LIVE IN
YOUR MIND. I'VE BEEN
DEAD FOR ALMOST THREE
YEARS NOW. I HAD ASTHMA,
TOMMY. REAL BAD ASTHMA. YOU
TOOK ME SWIMMING WHILE DAD
WAS GONE TO TOWN, AND YOU
DROWNED ME. YOU THOUGHT IT
WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO

IT WAS.

IT'S NOT SO
EASY TO DO THE
RIGHT THING, IS IT?

THE DOCTORS
SAID THE ASTHMA
MIGHT HAVE KILLED ME
SOONER OR LATER, SO
MAYBE MY DROWNING
WAS A BLESSING

THE ONLY
PROBLEM WAS, YOU
COULDN'T ACCEPT MY DEATH.
YOU KEPT BLAMING YOURSELF.



YOU WERE SUFFERING, I SAW WHAT THE ASTHMA WAS DOING TO YOU. I COULDN'T HELP BUT SEE YOU WERE ALWAYS FOLLOWING ME AROUND LIKE A LITTLE -

PUPPY, WE KNOW WHAT YOU DO TO PUPPIES, DON'T WE?



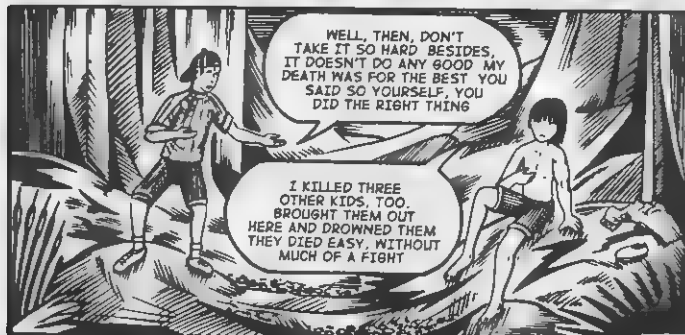
TOMMY PUNCHED. IN MICHAEL'S EYES HE CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF DEAD PUPPIES FLOATING, STARING ACCUSINGLY AT HIM WITH THEIR PINK TONGUES LOLLING FROM THEIR MOUTHS.

SEE SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T LIKE?

THAT'S RIGHT, YOU DON'T LIKE TO LOOK 'EM IN THE EYES, DO YOU?

THAT MUST BE WHY YOU PRETENDED YOUR DIVE WENT WRONG SO YOU COULD GET ME DOWN THERE IN THE DARK

I WAS ONLY DOING WHAT I THOUGHT WAS RIGHT



WELL, THEN, DON'T TAKE IT SO HARD BESIDES, IT DOESN'T DO ANY GOOD MY DEATH WAS FOR THE BEST YOU SAID SO YOURSELF, YOU DID THE RIGHT THING

I KILLED THREE OTHER KIDS, TOO, BROUGHT THEM OUT HERE AND DROWNED THEM THEY DIED EASY, WITHOUT MUCH OF A FIGHT



I DID IT BECAUSE THEY WERE SICK I WOULD'VE KILLED MORE IF THEY HADN'T CAUGHT ME

YOU'RE MY BROTHER I FORGIVE YOU

BUT I CAN'T FORGIVE ME DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? I CAN'T FORGIVE MYSELF



THEN YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO DO, YOU'RE NOT SCARED ARE YOU?

NO I'M NOT SCARED, NOT ANYMORE.



TOMMY LOOKED AT HIS REFLECTION IN THE WATER. SOMETHING ABOUT THE IMAGE DISTURBED HIM AND HE COULDN'T FIGURE OUT WHAT IT WAS, NOT UNTIL THE CATTAILS WHISPERED THE ANSWER TO HIM



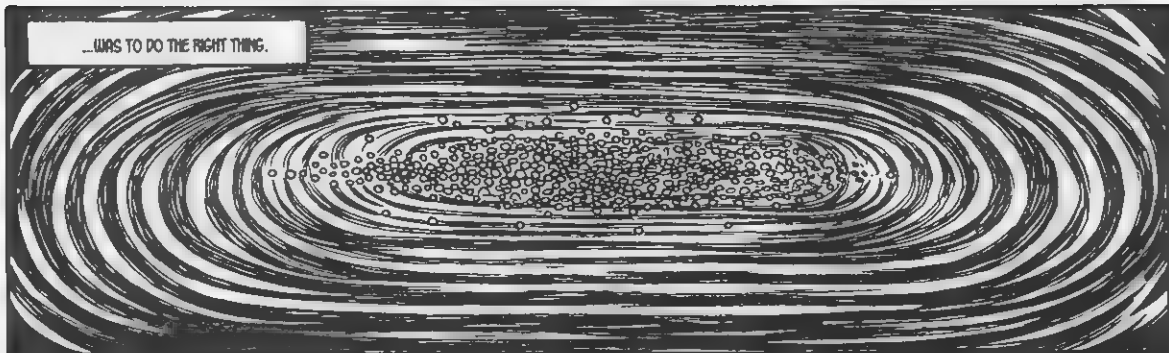
THEY HAD BEEN TRYING TO TELL HIM ALL ALONG. HE NODDED HIS UNDERSTANDING, HIS VOICE WAS FILLED WITH SADNESS AS HE WALKED INTO THE WATER.

I JUST WANTED TO DO THE RIGHT THING, MICHAEL...



...THAT'S ALL I EVER WANTED...

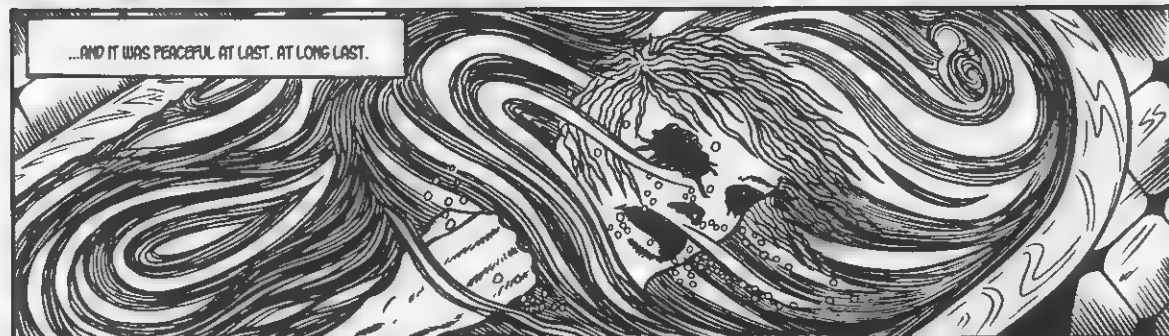
...WAS TO DO THE RIGHT THING.



...AND IN A SMALL WHITE ROOM, THE LAST BUBBLE
FLOATED UP FROM AN OVER FLOWING TUB, AND THE
FACE OF TOMMY LICHNER APPEARED IN THE WATER.



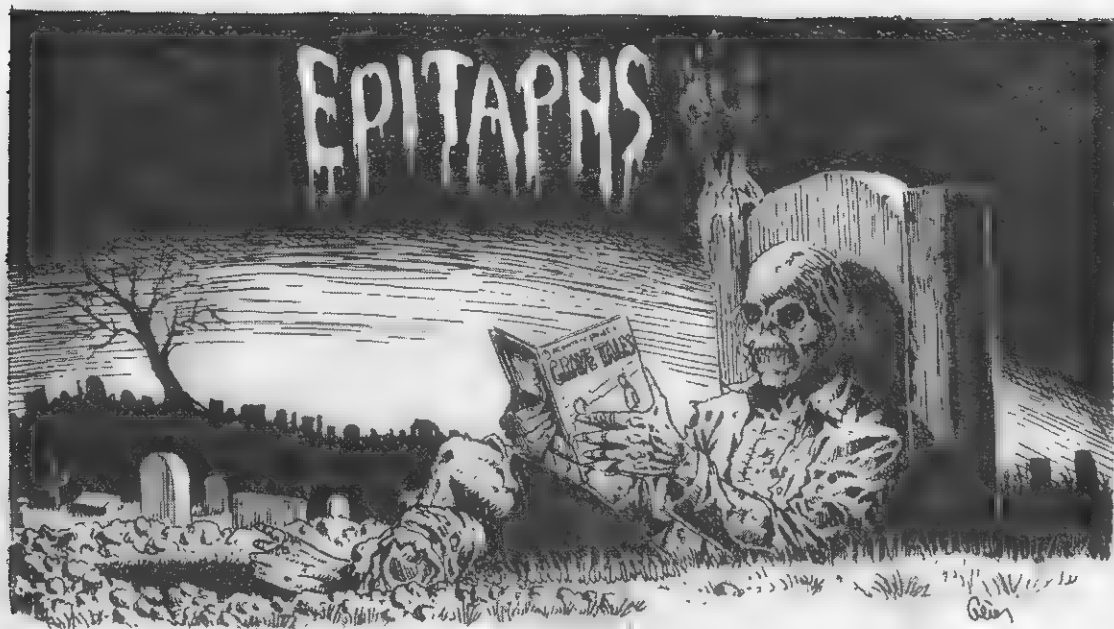
...AND IT WAS PEACEFUL AT LAST. AT LONG LAST.



WHEN THE NURSE FOUND HIM, SHE SAW THAT
HE HAD DUG HIS OWN EYES FROM THEIR SOCKETS,
AND WAS STILL HOLDING THEM IN HIS CLENCHED FISTS.



THE END



HOUSE HUNTING

BY RAY GARTON

The house was beautiful. It could not have been more suited to them had they designed it themselves.

"And it's in our price range," Kevin had said over and over as they moved through the house. "I can't believe it's in our price range."

Kevin and Anna Slater loved the house so much, they'd gone through it twice with the realtor, Mrs. Edgerly. She was a plump woman in her sixties with short silver hair, large glasses, and red lipstick that had feathered around the edges of her lips.

Anna turned to Mrs. Edgerly and said, "Could we have a little time alone to discuss this?"

"Of course," she said. She reached into her purse and took out a cellphone. "I have to make a couple calls, anyway. You two just wander around as you please. Then we'll talk. There are a couple things I need to tell you about the place."

They walked back through the living room holding hands. It was spacious, with an enormous picture window that looked out on the front yard. They went through the dining room and into the kitchen, to the cozy breakfast nook with the greenhouse window that provided a view of the sprawling backyard. They scooted into the breakfast nook and sat opposite each other, holding hands over the table.

"What do you think?" Kevin whispered.

"Are you kidding? It's *perfect*."

Kevin frowned as he slowly shook his head. "She said she had to tell us a couple things about the house. There's got to be something wrong with it. That's the only explanation for the price. This place should cost at least half again what they're asking for it."

Anna squeezed his hands. "Don't be so

negative."

"I'm not being negative, I'm being realistic."

"Well, don't be so realistic then," Anna said. "Honey, we're never going to find another place like this. I love it so much, I wish we were already moved in."

"Yeah. I feel the same way."

"Then why don't you look happy?"

"Because I'm wondering what she's going to tell us about the place."

"Let's go look at the master bedroom again."

They got up and went down the hall, up the stairs, and down another hall to the master bedroom.

"This is bigger than our whole living room, Kevin."

"I know. It's gorgeous."

Anna went to the closet, which had louvered accordian-doors, and opened it up. "Look at this closet. It's huge. And we both have one. Can you believe the—"

Anna stopped talking and frowned. She sniffed a few times.

"What's wrong?" Kevin said.

She sniffed again and wrinkled her nose. "I caught a whiff of something. It smelled like...well, like sulphur."

Kevin joined her at the closet and sniffed a few times. "I don't smell it."

"It was just a whiff. Seems to be gone now."

"Maybe it's the paint. It looks like this room was painted recently."

"It didn't smell anything like paint."

"Hm. Well, I don't smell it. Maybe you have a brain tumor."

She slapped his shoulder. "You're just all sunshine and daisies, aren't you?"

"Let's go back downstairs and see what Mrs. Edgerly has to say about the place."

Back in the foyer, Mrs. Edgerly was just finishing up a phonecall.

"Okay, darling," she said. "I'll see you this evening, then." She severed the connection and put the phone back in her purse. "That was my granddaughter. She just had a baby. I can't believe I'm a great-grandmother."

"You said you had a couple things to tell us about the house," Kevin said.

Mrs. Edgerly nodded. "Yes, yes, I do. The house has a history of plumbing problems. Nothing big, nothing major, but I think it's only fair that you know."

"Is that all?" Anna said.

"Well...no. There's something else. I hesitate to tell you because...well, because of how it sounds. It sounds a little crazy, if you want to know the truth."

"What is it?" Kevin said.

"It seems the house was built on a gateway to Hell."

Kevin and Anna stared at Mrs. Edgerly for several seconds, until Kevin finally said, "I beg your pardon?"

Mrs. Edgerly chuckled. "Yes, that's how most people react. But I'm afraid it's true. According to the original owners, there are sometimes...well, *disturbances* in the house."

"Disturbances?" Anna said. "What kind of disturbances?"

"I don't know all the details, but it seems there have been some...well, appearances. Of, you know, demons. Satan's minions, that sort of thing. Nothing destructive, but it was enough to get on the nerves of the original owners. They called in a medium and she determined that the house had been built on one of the gateways to Hell. They stayed here for years after that, but I guess they finally got tired of it, so they decided to sell. But they wanted to make sure that any prospective buyers were informed of the situation, so I'm obligated to tell you."

Kevin and Anna looked at each other, then back at Mrs. Edgerly, then at each other again.

"Are you serious?" Kevin said.

"Oh, yes, quite serious," Mrs. Edgerly said.

"Just a few minutes ago," Anna said, "I smelled sulphur in the bedroom closet."

"Yes, that's part of it. Strange smells, strange sounds."

Kevin and Anna looked at each other again for a long moment. Kevin smirked.

"Look," Mrs. Edgerly said, "why don't you two think about it and discuss it for a couple days, then call me. Does that sound okay?"

Kevin nodded. "Yes, I think that's what we'll do."

Mrs. Edgerly opened the front door. "You have my number, yes?"

"Yes, we do," Anna said. "Thank you for showing us the house."

"Of course. It's a wonderful house, especially if you're planning to have kids." She held the door open for Kevin and Anna, and they walked out. She pulled the door closed as she went out, then locked it.

Kevin and Anna said goodbye, got in their car, and drove away.



They talked about it all that evening, and the next day over breakfast, then when they got off work. For dinner, they went to a Mexican restaurant called Tortilla Flats and got a booth.

"I think we should take it," Kevin said.

Anna frowned as she ate her taco salad.

"Why are you hesitating?" he said.

"What about the plumbing?"

"How bad can it be? I mean, she said 'plumbing problems.' She didn't say they were severe. In fact, she said it was nothing major."

"True."

"A few minor plumbing problems are nothing when you think about the house we're getting. For the price, it's spectacular."

"Yes, I know. I love the place. But...well, I just can't stop thinking about what else she said."

Kevin chewed a bite of his chimichanga. "You're not serious."

"I smelled sulphur."

"You smelled something that smelled *like* sulphur. It doesn't make sense that you'd smell sulphur in that house."

"It does if it's built on a gateway to Hell."

"Oh, please, don't tell me you're taking that *seriously*."

"There must be *something* to it, or she wouldn't have told us about it."

Kevin laughed as he shook his head. "The original owners were obviously *kooks*. I mean, they called in a medium – that right there tells you what kind of people they are. The medium told them the house was built on a gateway to Hell. What do you *expect* a medium to say?"

Anna's cellphone chirped the William Tell Overture in her purse. She reached in, took it out, and opened it.

"Hello?" She looked at Kevin as she listened. "I see. Well. Um, can you hold on for just a second, Mrs. Edgerly?" Anna lowered the phone, leaned forward, and whispered, "It's Mrs. Edgerly. She says someone else is interested in the house. If we want it, we have to say so now, and she'll meet us over at the house to sign some papers that'll ensure we get the house."

"Then let's do it."

Anna squinted slightly. "Are you sure?"

"I am. I can't understand why you're not."

Anna thought about it a moment, then put the phone to her ear again. "All right, Mrs. Edgerly, we'll meet you over at the house. We're right in the middle of dinner—can we finish eating first?"

She nodded as she listened. "Okay, fine. We'll see you over there in about half an hour." She closed the phone and put it back in her purse. "Let's finish our dinner."

"No, wait. You're not positive? I thought you loved the house."

"I do. But...what if it's haunted?"

Kevin laughed again. "Honey, I can't believe you're taking that seriously."

"I know, I know, it's silly. Forget it. We'll go over there and sign the papers as soon as we're done eating."

1 1 1

Dusk was just beginning to settle in when Kevin parked the car in the driveway.

"We better get in there," he said, "or it'll be too dark to sign the papers."

They got out of the car. The front door was open wide. They stepped inside and Anna called, "Hello?"

From inside, Mrs. Edgerly shouted, "I'm in the breakfast nook."

They went down the hall to the kitchen and sat across from Mrs. Edgerly in the nook. She had a paper and pen on the table before her.

"There you are," Mrs. Edgerly said with a pleasant smile. The fading light of the summer evening fell through the greenhouse window. Mrs. Edgerly slid the pen and paper across to Kevin. "I'll need both your signatures on this."

Kevin picked up the paper and started to read it. "What is this, exactly?"

"There's no need to read it," Mrs. Edgerly said. "It simply states that you're going to buy the house. It's mostly to protect you so the house doesn't get sold out from under you."

Kevin frowned across the table at her. "Is this something standard?"

"Actually, it's quite new. As I said, it protects you. It simply states that you are deciding to buy the house. It's got nothing to do with the loan—"

Kevin continued to read the document.

Mrs. Edgerly interrupted herself to say, with some irritation, "There's really no need to read it, Mr. Slater." She reached across the table and took the paper out of his hand and set it down on the table again.

Kevin noticed something that struck him as odd: Mrs. Edgerly's fingernails were long and black. He hadn't noticed that before.

"If I'm going to sign something," Kevin said, "I prefer to read it first."

"Just go ahead and sign it, Mr. Slater." There was a sharp edge to her voice.

"Look," Kevin said, "I don't like being pressured into this. All I want to do is read it." He picked up the paper again. He frowned and squinted slightly at the page. "What...what is this? What's this about my soul?"

Mrs. Edgerly burst into flames, but only for an

instant. When the flames disappeared, Mrs. Edgerly was gone, and sitting in her place was a hulking shirtless figure with rippling muscles and deep red skin. The figure had the head of a ram with great curling black horns. The piercing eyes were a fiery red. The creature slammed a fist onto the table and, in a voice that sounded like a clogged drain, said, "Just *sign it*, dammit!"

Anna screamed as Kevin got up and pulled her over the cushioned bench and out of the breakfast nook. They hurried out of the kitchen and ran back down the hall and out the front door. They got into their car and Kevin started it before Anna had her door closed.

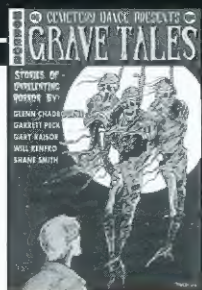
As they drove away from the house, both of them were breathing hard, their hearts hammering in their chests. They said nothing for half the ride back home.

Finally, Anna said, "I think we should keep looking."

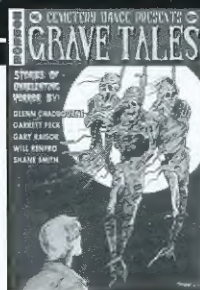
Kevin said, "Yeah. Definitely."



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